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ABSTRACT

In previous presidential administrations, particularly since the advent of television, American presidents have been able to address a large majority of the public by "roadblocking" the networks during the time they speak; that is, all three networks broadcast presidential addresses simultaneously. In recent administrations, particularly in the Reagan administration, network ratings for presidential addresses have declined dramatically. In an effort to discover (1) how much presidential ratings have declined in the past 18 years, (2) whether the decline has been greater or lesser than the decline of overall network ratings, and (3) whether televised presidential speeches draw viewers or drive them away, a study was conducted using Nielsen ratings during the Nixon, Ford, Carter, and Reagan administrations. Findings show that not only have prime time ratings dropped, from 79 percent for Ford and Nixon to 61 percent for Reagan, 25 million viewers in Reagan's administration defected to other programing during prime time addresses. Moreover, prime time viewer decline for presidential addresses was far steeper than for overall network audience decline. It is not clear whether the decline is due to public political apathy, a greater number of entertainment choices (i.e., cable television), or other causes, but it is possible that the number of presidential addresses that are televised could be lessened due to economic infeasibility. (JC)

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THE WEAKENED WHITE HOUSE VOICE: THE RATINGS DECLINE OF PRESIDENTIAL TELEVISION

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Since the early days of radio, broadcasting has played an important role in providing a forum for presidents of the United States to communicate with the American people. By the end of the Roosevelt Administration, a firm precedent had been set for the four networks (ABC, CBS, MBS and NBC) to broadcast presidential addresses simultaneously (Minow, Martin and Mitchell, 1973). By "roadblocking" the major network schedules, a huge national audience was created for the president.

When television overtook radio in the fifties, the television networks continued the tradition of simultaneous broadcast of presidential addresses. While, in theory, each network acted independently, their news judgments were nearly always in sync. From the midpoint of the Johnson Administration until the midpoint of the Ford Administration, the networks never failed to broadcast a presidential address live (Rutkus, 1976). Since that time, there have been only four occasions when the networks have not acted in concert, once in the Ford and Carter Administrations and twice during the Reagan Administration.

In 1970, Senator J. William Fulbright proclaimed that the power of presidential television had done as much to "expand the powers of his office as would a constitutional amendment formally abolishing the co-equality of the three branches of government"

(U.S. Congress, 1970). Much of the power of presidential television came from simultaneous access. If the president spoke on all three networks, few options existed for the viewer. As a result, presidential speeches routinely attracted more than eighty percent of those watching television, an audience no one network could command.

In 1975 A.C. Nielsen analyzed ratings of 19 appearances (12 in prime time) by President Gerald Ford to determine if the audience had decreased since the beginning of his presidency. Excluding the Ford inauguration (90 share) which was not included in the study, the first nine presidential broadcasts had an 81 share compared to a 78 share for the second nine. From this data, the study concluded that there was no evidence of significant erosion.

The Nielsen study also indexed presidential broadcasts to "normal tv usage" during the same time slot used by the President to see if these special broadcasts were attracting new viewers or driving them away. Sixteen of the 19 presidential appearances actually raised ratings over normal entertainment offerings (Nielsen, 1975). Reacting to the study, Minow and Mitchell (1976) concluded that presidents not only reached high audiences but attracted additional viewers who would otherwise not be watching. Because the share of network audience, which remained stable during the Ford Administration, has steadily declined since 1979, one can reasonably assume that the earlier Nielsen data is now invalid and that presidential broadcasts have

decreased along with the network share.

This paper will examine presidential ratings over four administrations (Nixon, Ford, Carter, and Reagan) to determine the extent of any ratings decline. The study will address the following research questions:

1. How much have presidential ratings declined during the past 18 years?

2. Has the decline in presidential ratings been lesser or greater than the decline of overall network ratings?

3. Do televised presidential speeches draw viewers to the networks or drive them away?

METHOD

Ratings information on 186 presidential broadcasts (addresses to the nation, news conferences, televised speeches, and State of the Union addresses) from 1969-1986 were examined using the bi-weekly pocket pieces during on-site visits to A. C. Nielsen offices in New York and Northbrook, Illinois. Two presidential broadcast inserts were missing from the Nielsen material and were not available from alternative sources.

Presidential broadcasts are "sustaining" programs which are given one cumulative rating for each program for all three networks. While individual networks can purchase data from Nielsen showing how their particular network fared during a sustaining program, this information is not available to scholars or the public. Cumulative ratings for presidential broadcasts,

inserted at the beginning of the pocket pieces, include Total Audience Households and Average Audience Households in percentages and thousands. These inserts sometimes include Total Persons and breakdowns for men, women, teens, and children.

For this study, the percentage of Average Audience Households and the share formed the primary data base. The share was calculated by dividing the percentage of Average Audience Households by the average HUT during the speech. Because the available television audience can be expected to vary greatly by time of day and by season, audience share is a better indicator of viewing trends than absolute audience size. Additional ratings information concerning entertainment programs during 1985-86 was taken from the weekly ratings listing in USA Today.

FINDINGS

Table I shows that presidential ratings for both speeches and news conferences in all time periods reached a peak during the Ford Administration and declined significantly during the Reagan Administration. The decline is even more apparent when prime time speeches are isolated. During the first six years of his presidency, Ronald Reagan reached an average of only 61% of the people watching television during prime time compared to 77% for Jimmy Carter and 79% for Gerald Ford and Richard Nixon. In fact, the "great communicator" during the height of his presidency never reached as many people as Gerald Ford.

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Table I about here

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During prime time, the declines in audience meant millions of lost viewers. For example, President Reagan averaged 55 million viewers for his evening speeches compared to 69 million for President Carter. The correlation between audience share for presidential prime time addresses to the nation and the year of broadcast was significant enough to suggest the existence of a strong and negative linear relationship between the two variables ($r = .79$, $p < .0001$). While President Reagan's prime time speech ratings were respectable in the beginning of his Administration (1981--75% share), by his re-election campaign in 1984, just over half of the viewers watching television (53%) were watching the President. When Ronald Reagan urged Congress to adopt his Contra aid package in March 1986, more than half of those watching television turned away to something else, marking the first time in history that a president failed to attract at least 50% of the viewing audience.

Even during State of the Union messages, when audiences were traditionally higher than with Addresses to the Nation, the President slipped from an 84 share in 1981 to 58 in 1987, meaning that more than 25 million Americans had defected to other

programming during his presidency. Viewers were taking advantage of the growing alternatives on the dial, denying the networks a massive, captive audience.

Table II shows that the decline of presidential audiences for prime time addresses to the nation was far steeper than the decline of network audiences in general. The difference was particularly noticeable during the Reagan Administration where the President's share of audience dropped from 74% in 1981 to 56% in 1985, a rate of decline double that of the networks.

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Table II about here

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There was further evidence to suggest that presidential speeches were causing millions of Americans to turn away from network programming. A detailed examination of ratings from nine prime time presidential appearances (State of the Union, Addresses to the Nation, and News Conferences) during 1986 showed that an average of 11,135,021 fewer Americans watched a presidential appearance than the entertainment programs which were shown in each of the three weeks prior to and three weeks after the presidential speech. Viewer behavior ranged from more than 16 million defections when President Reagan spoke to the Nation on Contra Aid to Nicaraguan rebels in March, 1986, to only four million defections when he held a news conference in

November after the Iran arms scandal.

Fortunately for the networks, all but 181,000 of the more than eleven million defectors returned to network programming when the President finished. These findings imply that a substantial number of Americans are making a conscious decision to avoid just the President's message but are sophisticated enough to know when to return to network programming.

Presumably, millions of Americans are seeking alternative entertainment programming during presidential broadcasts. During President Reagan's 1987 State of the Union Message, overnight ratings in New York showed that independent station WNYW's audience doubled from a five to a ten rating and WOR's rose 75% when the President began to speak. WNYW's sales manager said that the increased ratings during presidential speeches were so routine that his station aired special movies and charged higher rates during presidential broadcasts, increasing the earnings of the station by more than $100,000 per night (Taylor, 1987).

DISCUSSION

This study shows that ratings for presidential television are in a steady downward spiral. Furthermore, the decline has been far more rapid than the erosion of network audience share. Contrary to the 1975 Nielsen study, presidential broadcasts are now driving millions of viewers away from the networks rather than attracting them as earlier Presidents had done.

Today, an entertainment program like "The Cosby Show" can attract more viewers on one network than the President can by appearing on all three simultaneously. While presidents can still command 80+ shares in times of crisis, gone are the days when network roadblocking automatically delivered a huge captive audience. The easy access to alternative cable programming makes it far easier than ever before for a viewer to turn away from network political programming.

A shrinking forum for presidential speeches could have a profound effect on political communication. Presidential imagemakers are gradually losing one of their rare opportunities to reach captive citizens only marginally interested in politics. On the other hand, the White House may be able to deliver a more sophisticated message knowing that it is reaching an active, information-seeking audience which has resisted the temptation to turn toward entertainment.

In a threatening economic climate for the broadcasting industry, the diminishing audiences for presidential television will no doubt create added pressures on network management. Already, the prime time news special is disappearing as financial managers avoid turning highly profitable entertainment time into unprofitable news time. Fewer presidential broadcasts mean fewer schedule disruptions, a more competitive prime time schedule, and added revenues. In such a bottom line climate, a natural alternative to expensive roadblocked access would be to rotate presidential television broadcasts among the three networks or

withdraw from the arena in favor of CNN or C-SPAN. While dropping presidential broadcasts would be economically beneficial, it could jeopardize the networks' reputation as the nation's "central nervous system" and the official purveyors of government communication. Events like President Kennedy's funeral, the space shuttle tragedy, Watergate, and pivotal presidential speeches all create a special bonding between the American people and the networks. Sacrificing that special status could accelerate movement into the post-network era of broadcast journalism.

It remains unclear from this study whether the decline in presidential ratings observed during the Reagan administration carries any special significance in terms of voter apathy or estrangement from the political process. Perhaps the increased menu of entertainment programming on cable is more responsible for the ratings decline than any viewer attitudes toward President Reagan or politics in general. More research is needed to ascertain viewer response to presidential communication and the value they perceive from watching or not watching.

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Table I
Presidential Share of Audience
Nixon-Reagan

President	Speeches Ave. Share	News Conferences Ave. Share	All Broadcasts* Ave. Share
Nixon	75% (22)**	75% (7)	76% (31)
Ford	81% (10)	76% (12)	78% (26)
Carter	74% (12)	67% (35)	69% (49)
Reagan	62% (28)	61% (32)	62% (66)

Table II
Comparison of Overall Network Prime Time Shares with
Presidential Broadcasting Shares, 1979-1986

Year	Network Share	Presidential Share	Difference
1979	91%	78%	-14%
1980	90%	79%	-11%
1981	85%	74%	-12%
1982	83%	65%	-22%
1983	81%	61%	-24%
1984	78%	56%	-28%
1985	77%	56%	-27%
1986	76%	58%	-24%

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*The number of broadcasts in this category is greater than the sum of speeches and news conferences because it contains ceremonial events, State of the Union messages, and other presidential broadcasts not included in the other two categories.

**In parenthesis are the number of presidential speeches used to calculate the average share.